



**University of
Zurich**^{UZH}

**Zurich Open Repository and
Archive**

University of Zurich
University Library
Strickhofstrasse 39
CH-8057 Zurich
www.zora.uzh.ch

Year: 2017

Book Review: Jan-Werner Müller, What is populism?

Räber, Michael Ivo

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1177/1478929917716098>

Posted at the Zurich Open Repository and Archive, University of Zurich

ZORA URL: <https://doi.org/10.5167/uzh-153352>

Journal Article

Published Version

Originally published at:

Räber, Michael Ivo (2017). Book Review: Jan-Werner Müller, What is populism? Political Studies Review, 15(4):612-613.

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1177/1478929917716098>

the legacy of a great thinker and shows the significance, relevance and value of his work.

Stamatoula Panagakou
(University of Cyprus)

© The Author(s) 2017

Reprints and permissions: sagepub.co.uk/journalsPermissions.nav

DOI: 10.1177/1478929917718673

journals.sagepub.com/home/psrev

Mere Civility: Disagreement and the Limits of Toleration by **Teresa M Bejan**. Cambridge,

MA: Harvard University Press, 2017. 272pp.,

£29.95 (h/b), ISBN 9780674545496

Modern civilisation is facing a crisis of civility. This is the initial premise of Teresa Bejan's *Mere Civility*, and her answer will be of interest to scholars who routinely address similar issues. The crisis of civility is seen in a rise in argument, polarisation and mutual hatred that Bejan argues may eventually pose a risk to the continuing stability of tolerant multicultural societies (p. 8). Simple calls for 'more civility' quickly run into problems, in that what is meant by 'civility' is unclear and, worse, the concept is often associated with status quo thinking and the exclusion of minority groups (p. 10).

Instead of engaging with the contemporary debates about civility and its purpose, Bejan appeals to historical writings on the concept. She argues that many of the issues modern societies face are not new concerns. Indeed, seventeenth-century thinkers Roger Williams, Thomas Hobbes and John Locke have already proposed possible answers that Bejan intends to examine (p. 19).

First, Bejan examines Williams' idea of a 'mere civility' that places minimal burdens on speech and expression and concerns itself primarily with preventing direct persecutions (pp. 58–61); second, Hobbes' argument in favour of a 'civil silence' whereby citizens are prohibited from public disagreement and norms of behaviour are imposed by the sovereign (pp. 98–106); and finally, Locke's solution of a 'civil charity' that is less concerned with preventing disagreeable speech than with promoting bonds of mutual understanding between citizens (pp. 129–138).

Bejan finally takes the position that only Williams' conception of civility stands a

practical chance of success in the modern era. The ideas of Hobbes and Locke place expectations that are too heavy on the citizens of diverse societies (pp. 153–157), while Williams' 'mere civility' requires only that we not translate disagreement into persecution (pp. 160–164).

Mere Civility's arguments are compelling, in that Bejan successfully draws parallels between the uncivil ferment of the seventeenth century and the tumult of diverse contemporary societies and then attempts to solve modern problems with historical solutions. There is an occasional sense of disconnection from the overall point when a reader is deep into an examination of how Hobbes' or Locke's political thought evolved, but this is entirely corrected in the final two chapters. In spite of the complex and theoretical nature of the underlying concepts, Bejan's writing is as clear and concise as possible. Overall, *Mere Civility* is a well-written and novel attempt at addressing serious issues surrounding difference in diverse societies.

Dan Poprdan
(University of Leeds)

© The Author(s) 2017

Reprints and permissions: sagepub.co.uk/journalsPermissions.nav

DOI: 10.1177/1478929917716896

journals.sagepub.com/home/psrev

What is Populism? by **Jan-Werner Müller**.

Philadelphia, PA: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2016. 119pp., £13.00 (h/b), ISBN 9780812248982

What Is Populism? is a timely book on a burning issue that brings soothing clarity into both the scholarly debate about a contested and notoriously vague concept and its polemical use in political rhetoric. Jan-Werner Müller combines in an elegant way relevant literature on populism from political theory, empirical social science and history and interweaves it with his own ideas and insights for an audience of both theorists and empiricists at all scholarly levels.

Müller starts by disqualifying a series of common ideas about the definition of populism. He shows that it is not adequate to identify the term with specific political programmes, with an essential critique of the establishment or with the style of political quarrels. His discussion of these widespread misconceptions

brings Müller to highlight the common logic of populism: its antipluralism.

Populists, Müller suggests, claim that only some of the people are really *the* people, and that only they as populists can identify and represent them. In consequence, he submits, the populist claim fundamentally contradicts the pluralism of democratic societies, to which it belongs that the *demos* is not seen as a closed singularity but as an open union of diverse individuals. By defining populism as a moralised form of antipluralism, Müller echoes some of the most influential definitions of populism in the literature (notably those of Cas Mudde and Cristóbal Rovira Kaltwasser), but he goes beyond them in offering a clear criterion that allows separating populism from legitimate forms of democratic persuasion.

Based on various examples from Viktor Orbán in Hungary to Hugo Chávez in Venezuela, Müller identifies in the second part of the book three populist techniques for governing that illustrate populism's antipluralistic tendency: colonisation (or occupation) of the state, mass clientelism, and oppression of the civil society and the media. This development of the argument convincingly proves that populists are willing and capable of governing and *do* constitute a concrete threat to democracy.

In the last part of the book, Müller engages with the question of how best to deal with populists. While he recommends an increased readiness for a substantive dialogue with those who are unjustly dismissed as populists, he also strongly advocates a determined vindication of democratic values in confrontation with true populists.

Müller's clear thesis about populism's antipluralist core is illuminating. However, it leaves the reader with questions regarding its far-reaching normative underpinnings, which are not investigated given the conciseness of the work. That said, this is a study which is excellently done and that provides an account of how to understand and tackle populism in modern democracies.

Michael I Räber
(University of Zurich)

Reordering the World: Essays on Liberalism and Empire by Duncan Bell. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2016. 441pp., £29.95 (h/b), ISBN 9780691138787

Reordering the World collects together some of Duncan Bell's most notable writings of the past 10 years, focusing in particular on British imperial thought in the Victorian era. With the exception of two chapters, these essays have all been published previously. But it is a mark of the quality of Bell's scholarship, and the integration of his thought, that their assembly here works as well – indeed, better – than many freestanding monographs.

Equally adept in the disciplines of political theory and the history of political thought, Bell moves seamlessly between them. Encouraging us to understand the ongoing conceptualisation of liberalism as bound up with its own self-affirmed history, he shows that at crucial points in its genesis, liberal thought was inseparable from meditations on empire. Moreover, because liberal practice was also bound up with real-world imperial administration, it is hopeless to attempt to understand either liberalism or empire via single-track interpretations. One must be simultaneously historian *and* political theorist.

The depth of Bell's engagement pays off in many rewarding ways, two of which deserve special mention. First, a major upshot of the work is that we must learn to move beyond existing debates on the alleged opposition, or co-dependence, of liberalism and empire. Much energy has been expended upon the question of whether liberalism is inherently imperialistic, or whether the two can come apart (and hence whether liberalism can transcend and repudiate its bloody imperial past). Bell, however, impresses the necessity of seeing that the varieties of liberalism and imperialism – and in turn, the varieties of imperial and liberal *thought* – entail that no simple story of opposition or integration can ultimately be tenable. Understanding the relationships between liberalism and empire requires detailed study of a range of complex cases, which often pull in different directions. History is just too messy for neat conceptual stories here. Adequate theory will have to reflect this.

Second, Bell brings to the fore the thus-far neglected importance of settler colonialism to imperial thought, in particular how the fate of